VOLUME XL, NO. 6
FEBRUARY 11, 1987

THE POWER OF WORDS

THESE are days of great need felt by rulers as well as the ruled. The ruled commonly admit their helplessness, at least to each other, while the rulers pretend that only stubborn men of evil intentions stand in the way of the good of all. These enemies of mankind must be chastened, the rulers say, or the time will come when we shall have to eliminate them by a just war. The ruled hate the thought of what war will cost, how many millions of lives war will take, and the decades or even centuries recovery will require. But the ruled also have become used to having their decisions made for them by others, and find it difficult to imagine standing apart from the plans of the rulers. The rulers have all the tools of coercion, including the habits of obedience of the people, on their side. And the rulers have habits of their own, which include the expectation of being obeyed. So, century after century, we have wars. In this century there have been two great wars and dozens of smaller wars, until poverty, want, and starvation are a prevailing condition in many parts of the world, with little or no prospect of relief from this trend. Why, then, are preparations for war not reduced or set aside entirely?

Never have so many books been published to say that war must be outlawed, made impossible, especially since the tools of war have grown so efficient and destructive that we can no longer even imagine what the results of another war would be like. Many people have decided it is no use to think about a coming war, since they are helpless to prevent it and the fear generated by brooding over this possibility, or likelihood, will interfere with the practical side of their lives. Psychologists agree that worrying about war will unfit the worriers to make a living. Yet a small but growing minority turn their anxieties into fuel for anti-war activity. They organize groups, they make demonstrations, they publish books and articles, circulate broadsides, speak on the streets, in churches, and in forums. They are indeed having an effect: more and more people are deciding against any sort of war. But unfortunately, not enough of them. One important question is: Why? What could be more obvious than the fact that war will mean the end of civilization as we know it, and of a major portion of the earth's present population.

It may help to consider one possibility. What is the extent of the power of words? Or: what interferes with the effect of words on people who read or hear them? A small book that has just come out raises all these questions because the words in it have great persuasive strength. It is the long essay by Albert Camus, *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*, first published in 1946 in *Combat* in France, and in English in 1947 in the July-August *Politics*. The new edition of this essay has a long introduction by R. Scott Kennedy and Peter Klotz-Chamberlain and is issued by New Society Publishers in paperback at $3.95. Perceptive readers should own and circulate this book. It has a power seldom approached by any pacifist writer save Tolstoy or Gandhi. Yet you wouldn't call Camus a "pacifist." He was a man deeply concerned with the dignity of all human beings and he addressed this quality in his readers. His book, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (Modern Library, 1960), has in it his essay, "Reflections on the Guillotine," which may be the strongest indictment of capital punishment in print.

In *Neither Victims Nor Executioners*, he begins by declaring that we live in the century of Fear.

> We live in terror because persuasion is no longer possible; because man has been wholly submerged in History; because he can no longer tap that part of his nature, as real as the historical part, which he recaptures in contemplating the beauty of nature and of human faces; because we live in a world of abstractions, of bureaus and machines, of absolute ideas and of crude messianism. We suffocate among people who think they are absolutely right, whether in their machines or in their ideas. And for all who can live only in an atmosphere of human dialogue and sociability, this silence is the end of the world.

> To emerge from this terror, we must be able to reflect and to act accordingly. But an atmosphere of terror hardly encourages reflection. I believe, however, that instead of simply blaming everything on this fear, we should consider it as one of the basic factors in the situation, and try to do something about it. No task is more important. . .
>
> Before anything can be done, two questions must be put: "Do you or do you not, directly or indirectly, want to be killed or assaulted? Do you or do you not, directly or indirectly, want to kill or assault?" All who say No to both these questions are automatically committed to a series of consequences which must modify their way of posing the problem.

Camus never wrote down or up; to do so would weaken what he had to say; and anyhow, he was unable to do it. He wrote on the level—his level—for those who could hear what he said. The printers who had worked with him while he was editing *Combat*, the underground Resistance newspaper during the war, loved him and understood him. They recognized his integrity and listened to what he said. This was surely one of the sources of his power. His lucid reasoning power was another source. He goes on:

> . . . . what strikes me, in the midst of polemics, threats and outbursts of violence, is the fundamental good will of everyone. From Right to Left, everyone, with the exception of a few swindlers, believed that his particular truth is the one to make men happy. And yet the combination of all these good intentions has produced the present infernal world, where men are killed, threatened and deported, where war is prepared, where one cannot speak freely without being insulted or betrayed. Thus if people like ourselves live in a state of contradiction, we are not the only ones, and those who accuse us of Utopianism are possibly themselves also living in a Utopia, a different one but perhaps a more costly one in the end.
>
> Let us then, admit that our refusal to legitimize murder forces us to reconsider our whole idea of Utopia. This much seems clear: Utopia is whatever is in contradiction with reality. From this standpoint, it would be completely utopian to wish that men should no longer kill each other. That would be absolute Utopia. But a much sounder Utopia is that which insists that murder be no longer legitimized.

Both Capitalism and Communism, Camus says, regard war (which is murder) as legitimate. The conflict between Capitalism and Communism is, then, a conflict between two utopian dreams, not a conflict between Utopianism and reality. . . . "Relative Utopia," Camus says, "is the only realistic choice; it is our last frail hope of saving our skins."

Camus was a man of strong intuition who felt obliged to support his insight with arguments from history. The world, he was convinced, has outgrown war. Even revolutionary war within the limits of one country no longer has meaning. He says:

> Since August 1944, everybody talks about revolution, and quite sincerely too. But sincerity is not in itself a virtue: some kinds are so confused that they are worse than lies. Not the language of the heart but merely that of clear thinking is what we need today. Ideally, a revolution is a change in political and economic institutions in order to introduce more freedom and justice; practically, it is a complex of historical events, often undesirable ones, which brings about the happy transformation.
>
> Can one say that we use this word today in its classical sense? . . .
>
> This concept obviously lacks meaning in present historical circumstances. For one thing, the violent seizure of power is romantic idea which the perfection of armaments has made illusory. Since the repressive apparatus of a modern State commands tanks and airplanes, tanks and airplanes are needed to counter it. 1789 and 1917 are still historic dates, but they are no longer historic examples. . . .
>
> Thus we can only speak of world revolution. The revolution will be made on a world scale or it will not be made at all. But what meaning does this expression still retain? There was a time when it was thought that international reform would be brought about by the conjunction of a number of national revolutions—a kind of totting-up of miracles. But today one can conceive only the extension of a revolution that has already succeeded. This is something Stalin has very well understood, and it is the kindest explanation of his policies (the other being to refuse Russia the right to speak in the name of revolution). . . . Inside national boundaries, revolutions have already been costly enough—a cost that has been accepted because of the progress they are assumed to bring. Today the cost of a world war must be weighed against the progress that may be

> hoped for from either Russia or America gaining world power. And I think it of first importance that such a balance be struck, and that for once we use a little imagination about what this globe, where already thirty million fresh corpses lie, will be like after a cataclysm which will cost us ten times as many.

We might note that Camus' figures are conservative indeed, compared to later estimates of the total casualties of World War II, and that there were not available to him then the calculations of the deaths to be anticipated or the slaughter to be expected from a nuclear war. Yet what he says is sufficient, as he says, to "give pause to those who talk lightly of revolution."

> The *present-day* content of this word must be accepted or rejected as a whole. If it be accepted, then one must recognize a conscious responsibility for the coming war. If rejected, then one must either come out for the status quo—which is a mood of absolute Utopia insofar as it assumes the "freezing" of history—or else give a new content to the word "revolution," which means assenting to what might be called relative Utopia. Those who want to change the world must, it seems to me, now choose between the charnel house threatened by the impossible dream of history suddenly struck motionless, and the acceptance of a relative Utopia which gives some leeway to action and to mankind.

Camus was uncompromisingly against any intentional taking of the lives of others, whether in war or in peace. In "Reflections on the Guillotine," one of a group of essays which he contributed to a book which he and Arthur Koestler did together, he began by describing something that happened to his father:

> Shortly before the war of 1914, an assassin whose crime was particularly repulsive (he had slaughtered a family of farmers, including the children) was condemned to death in Algiers. He was a farm worker who had killed in a sort of bloodthirsty frenzy but had aggravated his case by robbing his victims. The affair created a great stir. It was generally thought that decapitation was too mild a punishment for such a monster. This was the opinion, I have been told, of my father, who was especially aroused by the murder of the children. One of the few things I know about him, in any case, is that he wanted to witness the execution, for the first time in his life. He got up in the dark to go to the place of execution at the other end of town amid a great crowd of people. What he saw that morning he never told anyone. My mother relates merely that he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit. He had just discovered the reality under the noble phrases with which it was masked. Instead of thinking of the slaughtered children, he could think of nothing but that quivering body that had just been dropped onto a board to have its head cut off.
>
> Presumably that ritual act is horrible indeed if it manages to overcome the indignation of a simple, straightforward man and if a punishment he considered richly deserved had no other effect in the end than to nauseate him. When the extreme penalty simply causes vomiting on the part of the respectable citizen it is supposed to protect, how can anyone maintain that it is likely, as it ought to be, to bring more peace and order into the community? Rather, it is obviously no less repulsive than the crime, and this new murder, far from making amends for the harm done to the social body, adds a new blot to the first one.

There are nearly 50 more pages in this essay, but the power in Camus' contention is evident in its beginning. It speaks to our humanity, saying more than statistics could ever convey. Individual feelings are the source of our convictions, and the rejection of war and capital punishment as national policies will grow out of strongly felt individual opinion, not pragmatic calculations. This is the reason why arguments about national policy in terms of the goals of national policy are weak compared to the inner conviction that it is wrong to kill. Camus unhesitatingly exposes his readers to the feelings aroused in those who have been in or close to war; in him those feelings were sustained throughout his life. His art lay in being able to make his readers experience those feelings to some extent. He speaks to them as individuals, since only individuals have the power within them—as they must learn, sooner or later—to remove from governments the power to make war. It would be well to consider the full implications of Camus' prescription, given in *Neither Victims Nor Executioners:*

> Yes, we must minimize domestic politics. A crisis which tears the whole world apart must be met

on a world scale. A social system for everybody which will somewhat allay each one's misery and fear is today our logical objective. But that calls for action and for sacrifices, that is, for men. And if there are many today who, in their secret hearts, detest violence and killing, there are not many who care to recognize that this forces them to reconsider their actions and thoughts. Those who want to make such an effort, however, will find in such a social system a rational hope and a guide to action.

They will admit that little is to be expected from present-day governments, since these live and act according to a murderous code. Hope remains only in the most difficult task of all: to reconsider everything from the ground up, so as to shape a living society inside a dying society. Men must therefore, as individuals, draw up among themselves, within frontiers and across them, a new social contract which will unite them according to more reasonable principles.

The peace movement I speak of could base itself, inside nations, on work-communities and, international communities; the former, organized cooperatively, would help as many individuals as possible to solve their material problems, while the latter would try to define the values by which this international community would live, and would also plead its cause on every occasion.

More precisely, the latter's task would be to speak out clearly against the confusions of the Terror and at the same time to define the values by which a peaceful world might live. The first objective might be the drawing up of an international code of justice whose Article No. I would be the abolition of the death penalty, and an exposition of the basic principles of a sociable culture (*"civilisation du dialogne"*). . . .

Let us suppose that certain individuals resolve that they will consistently oppose to power the force of example; to authority, exhortation; to insult, friendly reasoning; to trickery, simple honor. Let us suppose they refuse all the advantages of present-day society and accept only the duties and obligations which bind them to other men. Let us suppose they devote themselves to orienting education, the press and public opinion toward the principles outlined here. Then I say that such men would be acting not as Utopians but as honest realists. . . .

Whether these men will arise or not I do not know. It is probable that most of them are even now thinking things over, and that is good. But one thing is sure: their efforts will be effective only to the degree they have the courage to give up, for the present, some of their dreams, so as to grasp the more firmly the essential point on which our very lives depend. Once there, it will perhaps turn out to be necessary, before they are done, to raise their voices.

Camus, be it noted, says little about the acts of evil men. He accepts no scapegoats, sets no tasks for the righteous and the pure. He simply affirms that making killing legitimate is intolerable, beneath the dignity of man. We must find ways to live which do not require it, which means, of course, that we will not agree to the legitimacy of murder for any reason. As the authors of the introduction say:

> The renunciation of violence and murder is for Camus a moral imperative in its own right. But it was also the practical consequence of a basic social contract. Camus concludes that those who identify with the victims of injustice or oppression must recognize how their own political loyalties and beliefs legitimate murder. Quite simply, *those who do not wish to be victims of murder must refuse to be executioners and refuse to view the taking of human life as legitimate.*
>
> Camus differs from many pacifists in his disavowal of the possibility of eliminating murder altogether. He considers such a goal utopian—beyond or outside of human experience. For Camus, it is, rather, the justification or rationalization of killing that must cease. Camus insists that the choice we must make is not whether or not we kill, but whether or not we *justify killing.* Do we legitimate murder?

Camus ends his essay by saying, "I have always held that, if he who bases his hopes on human nature is a fool, he who gives up in the face of circumstances is a coward. And henceforth, the only honorable course will be to stake everything on a formidable gamble: that words are more powerful than munitions."

REVIEW
MISMANAGING A CONTINENT

A READING of *Cadillac Desert* by Mark Reisner (Viking Penguin, 1986, $22.95) has the effect of making one wonder what indeed would be the right way for human beings to live on a continent well supplied with garden spots, mountains, vast plains, large rivers, and enormous deserts. Suppose the original settlers who came from Europe had been men like Thoreau instead of ambitious and adventurous fugitives from the confinements of the Old World, set upon not only living decently but becoming rich? How would they have behaved? Whatever else we say, we know that they would have lived lightly on the earth, changing the land as little as possible, respecting its limitations while enjoying its hospitality, adapting to its ways instead of determining to change them. In view of what Americans have done, and not done, during the past two hundred years, imagining settlers of that sort seems practically impossible, although the Indians who lived here first were something like that, and there have been other settlements around the world, if not civilizations, where people have loved and respected the land instead of merely exploiting it.

But Americans have been for the most part exploiters—even quite decent Americans have been exploiters—and only recently have they been wondering about their possible mistakes. *Cadillac Desert* is a dramatic story of the exploitation of natural resources by Americans, a tale of close to six hundred pages that took the author some five years to put together, of which Wallace Stegner has said that "millions ought to read it," since it reveals "the shape of a future that we have stubbornly refused to see." The book's subtitle, "The American West and its Disappearing Water," tells what all but a few have refused to see. The story is mostly about the Bureau of Reclamation, its original vision and what became of it at the hands of politicians and acquisitive farmers, many of them in California.

Most people back east think of California as a place of realized dreams where they would dearly love to go. They should read this book. One of its chapters begins:

> Everyone knows there is a desert somewhere in California, but many people believe it is off in some remote corner of the state—the Mohave Desert Palm Sprines, the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada. But inhabited California, most of it, is, by strict definition, a semidesert. Los Angeles is drier than Beirut; Sacramento is as dry as the Sahel; San Francisco is only half as wet as Mexico City. About 65 per cent of the state receives under twenty inches of rainfall a year. California, which fools visitors into believing it is "lush," is a beautiful fraud. . . .
>
> The whole state thrives, even survives, by moving water from where it is, and presumably isn't needed, to where it isn't, and presumably is needed. No other state has done as much to fructify its deserts, make over its flora and fauna, and rearrange the hydrology God gave it. No other place has put as many people where they probably have no business being. Twenty-seven million people (more than the population of Canada), an economy richer than all but seven nations in the world, one-third of the table food grown in the United States—and none of it remotely conceivable within the pre-existing natural order. . . . California agriculture supports a giant chemical industry (it uses about 30 per cent of all the pesticides produced in the United States), a giant agricultural-implements industry, an unrivaled amount of export trade. Because it relies on irrigation—and therefore on dams, aqueducts, and canals—there is a close symbiotic relationship with the construction industry, which is why politicians who lobby hard on behalf of new dams can count on great infusions of campaign cash from the likes of the Operating Engineers Local No. 3 and the AFL-CIO. And more than any other state, California has been a source of opportunities for the Bureau of Reclamation and the Corps of Engineers. . . .
>
> California has preached and practiced water imperialism against its neighbor states in a manner that would have done Napoleon proud, and, in the 1960s, it undertook, by itself, what was then the most expensive public-works project in history. That project, the State Water Project, more than anything else, is *the* symbol of California's immense wealth, determination, and grandiose vision—a demonstration that it can take its rightful place in the company of nations rather than mere states. It may also be the nation's foremost example of socialism for the rich.

The contention of *Cadillac Desert* is that California was, is—and will be—a desert state, whatever the promises, rhetoric, and even the engineering of its technological enthusiasts. As Reisner says:

> One does not really conquer a place like this. One inhabits it like an occupying army and makes, at best, an uneasy truce with it. New England was completely forested in 1620 and nearly deforested 150 years later; Arkansas saw nine million acres of marsh and swamp forest converted to farms. Through such Promethean effort, the eastern half of the continent was radically made over, for better or for worse. The West can never be. The only way to make the region over is to irrigate it. But there is too little water to begin with, and water in rivers is phenomenally expensive to move. And even if you succeeded in moving every drop, it wouldn't make much of a difference. John Wesley Powell, the first person who clearly understood this, figured that if you evenly distributed all the surface water flowing between the Columbia River and the Gulf of Mexico, you would *still* have a desert almost indistinguishable from the one that is there today. Powell failed to appreciate the vast amount of water sitting in underground aquifers, a legacy of the Ice Ages and their glacial melt, but even this water, which has turned the western plains and a large portion of California and Arizona green will be mostly gone within a hundred years—a resource squandered as quickly as oil.

Powell's heroic exploration of the Colorado River in 1869 brought him fame, but his later report on arid lands, which contained much good sense, was more or less ignored. He said, as Reisner puts it, that "the overwhelming portion of the West could never be transformed," but the mind of the nation had been made up to go West, enjoy life, and get rich. The historian, Walter Prescott Webb, repeated this warning in an article in *Harper's* in 1957 (May) saying that the worst folly we could commit would be to try to make over the West in the image of Illinois, but as Reisner says, "The editors of *Harper's* were soon up to their knees in a flood of vitriolic mail from westerners condemning Webb as an infidel, a heretic, a doomsayer."

Dam-building was the formula adopted by the Bureau of Reclamation to bring water to California where it was needed by the big farmers—the Reclamation law was passed in 1902 in behalf of the small farmers, but the California farmers, who had become large by virtual land steals, turned its meaning around and dams were built, thousands of them, all over the arid West. The story of how this happened makes the reader ashamed of the country and its government. Vanities and passions were obviously more important than common sense, real estate interests more powerful by far than actual human needs. And eventually, nature replied to these misuses and distortions by producing salts that destroyed fertile land, and sometimes poisons that led to the decimation of birdlife and possibly a threat to human health. Then there were dams, carelessly built in the wrong places, that washed away with the first flood, destroying homes and small towns, and rendering thousands of acres of good land useless to farmers. But people kept on coming to California, especially to Southern California, and the Los Angeles area grew and grew, until it became necessary for the city to beg, borrow, and steal an increasing water supply, destroying by taking their water away from fertile regions to the north.

All this is recounted in *Cadillac Desert.* Most of all it exhibits the stupidities of politics, the betrayals of the intentions of a few decent men, and the blind folly of self-willed leaders. Would it have been better to leave the land and its water the way they were, limit the number of people to come to the West to a total that the land could support as it was, and try to teach them that altering the modes of nature was not the right way to live on the earth? It might have proved better, certainly in the long run, but this would have amounted to attempting to change the fundamental character of the American people. An effort of this sort is now beginning, in the pioneering campaign of the bioregionalists, in the vision of books by Wendell Berry, in the agricultural reforms in which men like Wes Jackson are taking part, but, as they all know,

there is a long, long road ahead for such intelligent and committed Americans.

Meanwhile, for the rest of us, books like Reisner's *Cadillac Desert* are texts for the gradual re-education of the country. The first lesson to learn, it may be, is a strong measure of humility: Americans have great capacities, but they have not learned how to use them for the common good, and pursuing self-interest, as we have with rapacity, is to make war on the world and against the laws of nature. The price of our individualism is now becoming manifest on every hand. Humility is now required in order to make room for a new start. The second lesson of our experience is the need for assumption of responsibility—responsibility for everything that we do. But for responsibility to have actual content it must be understood in terms of a larger conception of being human—a renewal, at last, of the dignity of man. Responsibility, in these terms, becomes Promethean. The life of obligation begins in the cradle and goes beyond the grave. How shall we teach ourselves this? We hardly know, but we must begin to try.

COMMENTARY
GREENHAM COMMON

IN 1981 a group of women in England set out for Greenham Common, Berkshire, to protest the stationing there of U.S. cruise missiles. One of the women who joined the protest, Gwyn Kirk, is now in the United States, in an attempt to establish a lawsuit against the Reagan administration for deploying cruise missiles on British soil. An American writer for *The Nonviolent Activist*, published by the War Resisters League in New York, talked to her about the Peace camp in Greenham Common, now in its sixth year, and later published the interview in the January-February issue of the *Activist.*

Asked by the interviewer, Judy Kowalok, about the effect of the Peace Camp demonstration on British public opinion, Gwyn Kirk replied:

> I think the peace camp has been remarkable. Its persistence has been really special. There was no parliamentary or public debate when NATO made the decision to deploy cruise missiles in Britain. The peace camp and the whole series of actions that went with it put the issue on the public agenda in a way that clearly neither the British nor the U.S. government had any intention of doing. . . .
>
> On an international level the peace camp has become a very important symbol. I've heard Greenham described as the "mother camp" of the other peace camps throughout the world. Greenham has become a real magnet as women come from other countries including every country in Western Europe, the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand some of the eastern European countries, China, India, and more. Many of these women were so inspired by Greenham that they returned to their own countries and started new peace camps.

Gwyn Kirk also believes that the Camp influenced the British Labor Party to adopt as part of its platform a stand against cruise missiles. Guy Brett, a writer on art for the *London Times*, said in his book, *Through Our Own Eyes:*

> Although Greenham Common is specifically a protest against war and nuclear weapons, and this dictated the site of direct action and the particular discomforts the women took on, it rapidly came into confrontation with the whole system of values of which the Bomb is part, and which women felt they had, historically, no part in creating. They responded by themselves proposing a whole set of values, both personal and public, from forms of protest to attitudes toward the landscape, from ways of living to forms of communication—and art. If the Bomb is a great cause for our fear, it is also paradoxically a galvanizing force against those fears. For as one of the women lawyers involved with defending Greenham protesters remarked: "Why should courtrooms worry anyone when the threat of utter destruction hangs over us?"

Returning to the interview in the *Nonviolent Activist*, Judy Kowalok asked Gwyn Kirk about the morale of the women demonstrators today, getting this reply:

> The whole action at Greenham ebbs and flows. Sometimes there are many women there with high energy. But in the last two years the camp has been evicted daily—sometimes several times a day. This means that women sleep under pieces of plastic or out in the open in Gortex sleeping bags. During the evictions many of the benders (hand-made lean-to's which shelter the women) have been destroyed. Groceries have to be packed in shopping carts or old prams so that they can be wheeled off the site easily. The women are living in the most primitive and rudimentary conditions. At times, not surprisingly, morale is low.
>
> The amazing thing to me is the courage, the determination to keep the protest going, and the love the women have for one another—all of which grow as the women continue to stay at Greenham.
>
> As to what's nurturing the women, I think there is a degree of fear. This includes fear of the arms race, increasing violence in the world, personal violence against women and children, and an increased military build-up not only by the superpowers but by all countries. Anger and outrage also nurture the women. Money is being siphoned from socially useful things and flows like a river into what I call the "murder machine"—the arms race. I think there is a sense of complete outrage that people are forced to die of starvation while we stockpile food in Europe and North America. I think the women are very angry at the complete cynicism, arrogance, and greed that guides our government. That's a very powerful dynamic—anger—that keeps them moving. There is a great deal of hope there. There is a sense

that things can be very, very different and the women, in their own small community, are trying to live "peace now." Peace is as much of a verb as it is a noun, a process as much as a product. . . .

My hope is that attitudes are shifting and more people will come out again and again and we will see change like the gradual change that takes place as water wears away on a stone.

I think of peace camps as a stage in the process of different people becoming more active. I know of many women who have been active in the U.S. peace camps and who are now very active in affinity groups in their home towns. Peace camps brought them together.

CHILDREN
. . . and Ourselves
WHAT SCHOOLS CAN'T DO

JACQUELINE GROSS, author of *Make Your Child a Lifelong Reader,* and a specialist teacher with elaborate credentials in teaching reading, had an article in the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* for April 27, 1986, which should shock and then inspire all the parents in the country—the ones, that is, who are themselves able to read. Her title was "You'll Have to Teach Your Child to Read Yourself," which meant that the child may do it himself, or the parents may, but the schools will never do it.

She begins by saying that illiteracy in this country is commonly put at 97 million, adding that Jonathan Kozol thinks that it's more than twice as bad as that.

> Upward of 60 million adults, he estimates, "cannot read enough to understand the poison warnings on a can of pesticide or the antidote instructions on a can of kitchen lye; nor can they understand the warnings of the sedative effects of non-prescription drugs, handle a checking account, read editorials in a newspaper, nor read the publications of the United States Census, which persists in telling us with stubborn jingoistic pride that 99.4% of all Americans can read and write."
>
> Each year the number of illiterates in the United States increases by 2½ million. Slightly more than half of this number are immigrants. The rest—more than I million each year—are products of our schools.

Why? Where or how did the schools go wrong? The answer does not seem believable—that schoolteachers really don't know how to teach reading, but it seems to be a fact. The trouble, Jacqueline Gross says, began in 1957 when the Soviets put Sputnik into orbit and scared our government into thinking that maybe the Russians had become smarter than we are—especially in science and achievements in space, where we had been supreme. The government thereupon moved into education, with money to improve education and with tests to make sure the money was getting results. So there were "new methods" and a lot of tests. The new methods included breaking up reading into a lot of little separate operations, and the tests were to make sure they were being taught. Apparently, the specialists who worked out these methods never realized that learning those operations could not make a child *want* to read, but after a while bored the child to death. The teachers may have discovered this, but not the administrators. As our writer says:

> With this system, educators could measure what children had learned and how much more they knew after the learning experience transpired than they had before. The results may have satisfied all the adults involved, but for the children it was a disaster.
>
> The problem is that children can acquire thousands of skills, but the skills don't add up to reading. Though the system can teach the skills, it doesn't generate the dedication that ultimately makes a reader. It doesn't instill a sense of discovery, or unlock mysteries, or create the feeling of empathy, or do any of the other things reading does to produce pleasure.

She tells about a mother, a friend, whose boy was failing reading in school and how she, in desperation, began reading to him at home about the American revolution. (His father wrote on historical subjects.) After a while the boy was reading the book by himself. His mother asked him why he didn't read in school, and he told her: "Because the stuff they give us isn't interesting."

Learning how letters make words is fairly easy, but by the second or third grade repeating these lessons gets boring to children. By the fourth grade the children probably have an aversion to reading.

> Something else, in addition to boredom, contributes to this aversion. That something is fear—fear induced by the all-pervasive testing process made necessary by the government's demands for accountability. . . .
>
> The negative impact of testing is all-pervasive. Students have been so turned off by the endless series of tests that many school districts have resorted to carnival-like tricks to get them to school on testing

> days. . . . Even if they stay in the mainstream, today's students must continually confront the prospect of failure. Is it any wonder that even the brightest children find the pressure excruciating? Is it any wonder that, though they may learn to read, they seldom become lifelong readers?

Finally, to this critical part of her article, Jacqueline Gross adds:

> The greatest crime of all is what this system does to children's feelings about themselves—feelings that are absolutely vital to their ability to succeed in life. The moment children lose interest, their performances falter. Poor performance inevitably leads to loss of self-esteem. Loss of self-esteem just as inevitably leads to even lower performance, and the cycle continued until, for many, there is overwhelming despair and, for some, even thoughts of self-destruction. One seventh-grade boy told me: "I should be better now at reading words and understanding what they mean, even if I haven't seen them before. I get in trouble on that, and then I mess up my whole day. Instead of reading on, I think about it a long time. Last year, I called myself a mental retard. I felt, 'I'll just kill myself'."
>
> Whatever ailed the schools when Sputnik sent off alarms in American education, it was not as bad as the cure.
>
> As parents, we can press our educators and policy makers to recognize that the mass production of reading failures in our schools today is due not to faulty children but to a faulty system of reading instruction. But we can't afford to wait for the system to be changed. If our children are to become lifelong readers, or even adequate readers, we must act while they are in the learning stage.

What this teacher says about the capacity of parents to teach their children to read is not just hopeful guesswork. She has seen them do it, again and again. Moreover, "Dozens of studies in the last quarter-century have shown that parents do teach their children how to read before age 6. And they do it without benefit of teaching license or reading systems."

How do they do it?

> The only skill parents need when they help their child learn to talk is to know how to talk themselves. Reading is no different. The only skill parents need to help their child become a reader is to know how to read themselves.
>
> Parents, in fact, are far more qualified than any teacher to deliver the most significant message about reading that a child will ever receive: that language, whether oral or written, contributes to the excitement, fullness and joy of life. *That* is the message that children aren't getting in school. Parents can communicate the message in the simplest possible way, by sharing language with their child in a positive manner.
>
> They are with their child during his or her most fruitful language-learning years. They can give learning a positive emotional dimension by injecting their love and care into the reading situation. They can build their child's reading program on his or her interests. They can provide an unstressful environment.

The writer then lists ten specific things any parents can do to arouse a child's interest in learning how to read. She then says:

> In the end, it isn't reading systems that make children readers. Children become readers when they receive the kind of emotional and intellectual nourishment around reading that only a caring adult can give. . . . Parents who give their children the gift of reading give them, as well, an indelible experience with success, the very kind of experience that so many children are *not* getting today in our schools.

And this may prove only a beginning in the joy of teaching one's children other things that they want and need to know.

FRONTIERS

"In the Service of Life or Death?"

IT was pleasant to come across an article on the use of computers by Joseph Weizenbaum, professor of computer science at MIT, in the October/November issue of *Fellowship*, the pacifist magazine. He is, a note says, a member of the FOR. His article is a translation of a talk he gave to computer professionals in West Germany in July, 1986. He told them:

> We now have the power radically to turn the state of the world in directions conducive to life. In order to gain the necessary courage—not all of us are saints and heroes—we have to understand that for us as individuals, as well as for those we love, our present behavior is far more dangerous, even life threatening, than what healthy common sense demands of us. None of the weapons that today threaten every human being with murder, and whose design, manufacture and sale condemns countless people to starvation, could be developed without the earnest cooperation of computer professionals. Without us, the arms race, especially the qualitative arms race, cannot march another step. What does this say to us?

It says, Weizenbaum suggests, that computer experts share in the guilt for the present dangerous state of the world, sometimes, perhaps, without knowing it.

He gives an example of how this may be:

> A doctoral student characterized his projected dissertation task as follows. A child, six or seven years old, sits in front of a computer display that shows a kitten and a bear, in full color. The kitten is playing with a ball. The child speaks to the computer system: "The bear should say 'thank you' when someone gives him something." The system responds in a synthetic, but nevertheless pleasing voice: "Thank you, I understand." Then the child again: "Kitty, give your ball to your friend." Immediately we see the computer display throw the ball to the bear. Then we hear the bear say: "Thank you my dear kitten." This is the kernel of what the system, whose development is to constitute the student's doctoral work, is to accomplish. Seen from the technical point of view, the system is to understand spoken instructions—that alone is not simple—and translate them into a computer program which it is then to integrate seamlessly into its own computational structure. Not at all trivial, and beyond that, quite touching.
>
> Now a translation to reality. A fighter pilot is addressed by his pilot's assistant system: "Sir, I see an enemy tank column below. Your order please." The pilot: "When you see something like that, don't bother me, destroy the bastards and record the action. That's all." The system answers: "Yes sir!" and the plane's rockets fly earthward. This pilot's system is one of three weapons that are expressly described, mainly as a problem for artificial intelligence, in the Strategic Computing Initiative, a new major research and development program of the American military. Over six hundred million dollars are to be spent on this program in the next four of five years.

Prof. Weizenbaum then says:

> It isn't my intention to assail or revile military systems at this point. I intend this example from the actual practice of academic artificial intelligence research in America to illustrate the euphemistic linguistic dissimulation whose effect it is to hinder thought and, ultimately, to still conscience. . . . We anesthetize our ability to evaluate the quality of our work and what is more important, to identify and become conscious of its end use. The student mentioned above imagines his work to be about computer games for children, involving perhaps toy kittens, bears and balls. Its actual and intended end use will likely mean that some day a young man, quite likely the student himself—someone with parents and possibly a girl friend—will be set afire by an exploding missile sent his way by a system shaped by his own research.

He goes on to point out that in modern research, "every scientific and technical result will, if at all possible, be put to use in military systems."

> In these circumstances, scientific and technical workers cannot escape their responsibility to inquire about the end use of their work. They must then decide, once they know to what end it will be used, whether or not they would serve these ends with their own hands. . . . More than half of all the earth's scientists and engineers work more or less directly in military institutions or in institutions supported by the military. That is an evil that must be resisted.

Finally, Prof. Weizenbaum suggests that we must stop our language from being used as a

means of self-deception. Speaking of atomic explosives and hydrogen bombs, he says:

> Those aren't weapons, they are mass murder machines and mass murder machine delivery systems. That is how we should speak of them: clearly, distinctly and without evasion. Once we recognize that a nuclear mass murder machine is nothing other than an instant Auswitz—without railroads or Eichmanns or Dr. Mengele, but an Auswitz just the same—can we continue then to work on systems that steer these devices to living cities? That is the question I ask. Each of us must earnestly ask ourselves such questions and deeply consider the responses we find in ourselves. Our answers must finally manifest themselves in our actions—concretely, in what we do every day.

The object is to rid the world of nuclear mass murder devices "and perhaps also of nuclear power generators." Only one thing stands in the way: "it is the absence of political will."

Prof. Weizenbaum concluded his address to the German computer professionals:

> I have no right to demand anything from my colleagues. But they must know that we have the power either to increase the efficiency of the mass murder instruments we have and thereby make the murder of our children more likely, or to bring the present insanity to a halt, so that we and our children have a chance to live in human dignity. Let us think about what we actually accomplish in our work, about how it will be used, and whether we are in the service of life or death.